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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how C-SPAN videotapes can be used in the classroom to enhance student learning of issues related to diversity and rhetoric. The rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh is focused on in this particular classroom case study. The study of Limbaugh is relevant due to the success of his daily radio talk show, "The Rush Limbaugh Show." He has his fans and critics. One of the controversial areas associated with Limbaugh is his position on diversity issues. Thus, this classroom exercise focuses on that particular area and how he conveys his position, how it is interpreted, and how this often leads to a variety of interpretations. (Author/RS)

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CLASSROOM ANALYSIS OF DIVERSITY AND THE RHETORIC OF RUSH LIMBAUGH USING C-SPAN VIDEOTAPES AS A TEACHING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

This article will describe how C-SPAN videotapes can be used in the classroom to enhance student learning of issues related to diversity and rhetoric. The rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh is focused on in this particular classroom case study. Study of Limbaugh is relevant due to the success of his daily radio talk show, "The Rush Limbaugh Show." He has his fans and critics. One of the controversial areas associated with Limbaugh is his position on diversity issues. Thus, this classroom exercise focuses on that particular area and how he conveys his position, how it is interpreted and how this often leads to a variety of interpretations.

This article will describe classroom use of C-SPAN videotapes as a means to enhance student analysis of diversity issues related to the rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh. A primary objective in the development of my classroom assignments is to construct activities that convey theoretical understanding and illustrate correlation between theory and real world application. Theory and the application of theory should be woven into the fabric of knowledge. The use of C-SPAN videotapes, available from the Public Affairs Video Archives at Purdue University, provide a unique opportunity to meet this teaching objective. Communication scholars have acknowledged the use of C-SPAN as a teaching tool in resources such as C-SPAN in the Communication Classroom: Theory and Application (Muir, 1992). The C-SPAN application to be described in this article is useful in the Cross-Cultural Communication and Mass Media courses.

The rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh has been at the center of controversy since "The Rush Limbaugh Show" went on national radio in 1988. One of the controversial areas associated with Limbaugh is his position on diversity issues. The classroom exercise described in this article focuses on the rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh, regarding diversity issues, during the period 1990-2000.

Though he is well known, a brief orientation will provide context for the aforementioned inquiry. Rush Limbaugh, born in 1951 and raised in Missouri, is a college drop out who sought a career in radio after leaving home in 1971. He had a variety of successes and failures in radio and professional sports administration before his national radio show began in 1988. "By 1993 his syndicated three-hour radio program . . . became the most popular talk show on radio, reaching an estimated 20 million listeners daily. This spawned, in the fall of 1992, a syndicated half-hour

television show that quickly climbed in the ratings." His book The Way Things Ought To Be (Limbaugh, 1992) was a best-seller and served as a preface for See, I Told You So (Limbaugh, 1993) that had a first printing of two million copies, the largest of any book in U.S. history (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2001).

Limbaugh is widely popular with some segments of U.S. society and equally unpopular with others. He has consistently been referred to as the most dangerous man in America (Arkush, 1993). One of the reasons he is perceived so is because of his statements on diversity issues. Limbaugh offers an explanation on this. "It must be stated that all too often conservatives' are considered racists . . . . this phenomenon is purely related to the conservatives' strong commitment to free enterprise and their concern with the expansion of government and the welfare state. Liberals and the Democratic Party long have been perceived to be the political allies of blacks and other minorities because they advocate massive wealth-redistribution programs" (Limbaugh, 1993, p. 243). "I cringe . . . . at the constant accusations that we conservatives are facist, racist, selfish . . . ." (Limbaugh, 1992, p. 26).

The foundation for this inquiry rests on the general question "how does one become labeled as being insensitive to diversity?". More specifically in this analysis, what is it that Rush Limbaugh is saying that results in him being interpreted in such a manner? This is a difficult type of study because of the generalities involved. The contemporary usage of the term "diversity" has no concrete definition. There is no accepted standard by which one can be measured to indicate if one is racist, sexist or homophobic. This interpretation process is relevant in my Cross-Cultural Communication and Mass Media

courses. I recognized this as an opportunity to use C-SPAN as a teaching resource and to teach students how researchers study such issues.

To do this, my class observed a varied collection of public presentations made by Limbaugh between 1990-2000 and took note of any comments he made dealing with women, minorities, homosexuals or marginalized members of U.S. society. Presentations conveyed by C-SPAN were used as a representative sample in that C-SPAN does not have a political agenda and he was carried on C-SPAN in a variety of speaking situations. Use of C-SPAN in this manner is advantageous because it combines the visual with the aural. The observer consumes what is said and how it is said (hearing and seeing paralanguage cues). Celeste Condit (1989) posits that we, as consumers of mass media, tend to embrace media when it uses a vocabulary we are comfortable with and conveys our beliefs, attitudes and values. The aforementioned hearing and seeing serves to reinforce such reception by the consumer.

I contacted the Public Affairs Video Archives to obtain a listing of all the presentations made by Limbaugh between 1990-2000 that they have archived. The Public Affairs Video Archives maintains an archive of all C-SPAN broadcasts and has an index of individuals who appeared on C-SPAN. Thus, by inputting the name "Limbaugh, Rush" one can quickly retrieve a listing of all holdings (short or long) that feature Limbaugh. They can be contacted at www.c-spanarchives.org, 800-277-2698 or C-SPAN Archives, Public Affairs Video Archives, P.O. Box 2909, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47996-2909.

They provided me with a listing of 17 presentations that included Limbaugh. These included speeches, forums, video magazines, roundtables, public affairs events, and

in-studio broadcasts of Limbaugh's radio show. Eight of these presentations were selected for analysis. Criteria for selection included choosing tapes that covered the entire decade at intervals, conveyed Limbaugh in a variety of settings and speaking on a variety of topics. When possible, speculated length of his delivery was also a factor.

The following is a chronological listing and brief description of C-SPAN tapes studied.

1) June 1, 1990 – "Rush Limbaugh Show Simulcast" – 1:56 – ID# 12584

2) November 3, 1992 – "Rush Limbaugh Show Simulcast" – 1:47 – ID# 34031

3) February 18, 1994 – "Rush Limbaugh Radio Talk Show" – 2:58 – ID# 54681

4) November 12, 1995 – "GOPAC Meeting" – 1:25 – ID# 68299

5) October 11, 1997 – "Difference Between Conservatives and Liberals" – 0:27 – ID# 93489

6) November 12, 1997 – "American Spectator 30th Anniversary" – 1:00 – ID# 95143

7) February 12, 1998 – "Lincoln Day Dinner" – 1:02 – ID# 100448

8) February 20, 1999 – "The Future of Talk Radio" - :40 – ID# 120654

The total viewing time of all eight tapes combined is 11 hours and 15 minutes. These tapes convey Limbaugh in a variety of circumstances.

As indicated earlier, these eight tapes were viewed in their entirety and any mention of women, minorities, homosexuals and marginalized members of U.S. society was copied onto a separate excerpt compilation tape. The total time of all diversity related statements, added together, is 43 minutes.

There is no widely accepted paradigm for analyzing a speaker's sensitivity with diversity issues. What connotates sensitivity? What connotates insensitivity? Playing

the compilation tape in class, allowing students to draw their own conclusions regarding Limbaugh's sensitivity, promoted lively discussion and enlightened students on the role of mass media in creating public perceptions.

Most students had an opinion on where the rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh stands in relation to diversity issues but there was no uniform consensus on this. There is no common standard to gauge if someone is racist, sexist or homophobic. There is no such standard because it is so highly interpretive and subjective. What is acceptable to one is unacceptable to another. What is racist to one is not racist to another. Add to this that we are not only receiving words but interpreting context, tone of voice, paralanguage cues, gestures and nonverbal communication cues. Also, we each have our own frame of reference we are working from. Our minds are not blank slates.

I delivered "Diversity and the Rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh" to a group of students at the Cultural Diversity conference held at Ohio Dominican College in Columbus, Ohio. I played tape excerpts of Limbaugh during the presentation. I polled the students and their responses exemplified the interpretive and subjective nature of making diversity judgments described in the previous paragraph. There was no strong agreement, one way or the other, on the rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh and how it relates to diversity. Typical is the written comment made by one respondent: "I don't feel that Rush Limbaugh is a racist or sexist (from what I saw and heard) because he never made any direct statements toward a certain race or gender."

In The Rhetoric of Western Thought (Golden et al, 2001) the authors explain the artistic proofs of logos (logic), pathos (stimulation of emotion), and ethos (credibility) as being a general framework for interpreting speakers. One can at least submit evidence to

define what is logical but the other two areas, what is emotionally stimulating and who is credible (and for what reasons), are going to be far more dependent on the individuals involved. One can define the physical ingredients of chocolate but cannot prove that it tastes good or, if it is agreed upon that it does taste good, just how good it tastes.

A key finding from this study is that, although Limbaugh is well known, there's significant disagreement regarding how to define the meanings he conveys. It is not that the person being evaluated is so enigmatic but that the phenomena being assessed, in this case diversity issues, are difficult to assess in relation to viewpoints expressed by individuals. A paralleled case involves Ross Perot (Schnell, 1998). "Using C-SPAN to Evaluate Sensitivity Toward Cultural Diversity: The Case of Ross Perot's 1992 Presidential Campaign," that was included in Cultural Diversity & the U.S. Media, describes how Ross Perot's public statements were not commensurate with the public perception of his positions (as maintained by a significant portion of the public). The U.S. is a dynamic society composed of people of varied cultures, orientations and circumstances. As the public debate on matters related to this composition continues, the dialog will be enhanced if there is a differentiation between what are facts and what are inferences associated with the interactants.

Use of C-SPAN tapes to study this subject is particularly relevant in that the C-SPAN index helps define the sample to be studied and the tapes provide literal verbal meanings, indirect nonverbal meanings, and context for speeches. Transcripts provide literal statements but the videotapes frame the literal statements. This type of inquiry rests on what is said and equally important on how it is said.

In addition to the Public Affairs Video Archives contact information conveyed earlier in this report, the reader can also seek innovative instructional ideas from the C-SPAN in the Classroom organization at 400 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, D.C., 20001. The phone number is 800-523-7586 and the website is www.c-span.org.

The classroom format described in this report can be applied with other speakers and with a variety of issues. C-SPAN videotapes allow the viewer to interpret public figures in their own words, without journalistic interpretation. Public presentations can be studied in their entirety (or just using selected excerpts). Thus, C-SPAN videotapes are an innovative teaching tool that enhance student understanding.

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